



THE NEW SEEKERS

MODERN PILGRIMS QUIETLY TRAVEL ON FOOT TO PLACES WITH MEANING OR SIGNIFICANCE. CLARE GOGERTY STEPS IN ALONGSIDE THEM

Illustrations: GERALDINE SY/GOOD ILLUSTRATION

YOU MAY HAVE been on a pilgrimage without even knowing it. All it takes is to walk purposefully towards a place that means something to you. I realised this one spring on Iona in the Inner Hebrides, Scotland. I heard that there was a Well of Eternal Youth on the island's highest point. The trek up the hill to the spring wasn't particularly long or arduous. As I ascended, the island with its white, sandy shores and turquoise sea revealed itself beneath me. It was a crisp, sunny spring day and I walked slowly and carefully among the flowers that had just begun to open.

I found the well on the side of a hill – a deep pool surrounded by rocks, its surface rippled by the wind.

Sitting beside it, then dipping


my hands and face in the water, provided a rare and memorable moment of stillness and peace. The journey had taken on significance. It had become a pilgrimage.

Many of us are undertaking similar journeys – modern pilgrimages that have little to do with conventional religion or beliefs but are still searching for something. This revival is being championed by The British Pilgrimage Trust (britishpilgrimage.org), which runs guided pilgrimages, is developing new pilgrimage routes and is encouraging churches to open their doors as accommodation. Guy Hayward, one of its founding members, describes a pilgrimage as “an unbroken journey on foot to a holy place”, clarifying that ‘holy’ derives from the Old English ‘halig’ meaning healthy, wholesome.

Holy places, he says, are special places, toward which you feel summoned to walk.

Nearer home, I discovered another well, this time around the corner from *The Simple Things* office. One lunchtime, I set off to find it. The Clerk's well (from which the neighbourhood is named) was not as scenic as the one on Iona – it was by a busy road and in a modern building – but its spring had supplied water for centuries and it had once been regarded as a sacred place.

Could this lunchtime stroll be counted as a pilgrimage? Guy Hayward thinks so: “To go on a pilgrimage, you can start from your front door and go as far as you want in your own time,” he says. “A pilgrimage just requires that you set an intention.”

An illustration of two women walking away from the viewer on a grassy hill. The woman on the left has dark hair and wears a dark sweater and a red skirt with black polka dots. The woman on the right has long red hair and wears a patterned sweater and a dark skirt. The sky is a light teal color with a large orange sun setting behind white clouds. There are small orange flowers scattered on the hill and in the air.

Journey to a sacred site

All over the world, different religions have taken up pilgrimages: Muslims head to Mecca, Christians to Santiago de Compostela, Hindus walk the length of the Ganges. Whereas modern pilgrimages don't require a belief in God, they can follow the paths of these earlier pilgrims to a cathedral, chapel or shrine, and appreciate these places for the holy spaces they are.

What is considered sacred today, however, is much broader. Many ancient sites exert a powerful pull and have the additional benefit of being in the landscape, often in out-of-the-way and lovely places. Journey to a long barrow on the crest of a hill, a standing stone overlooking a bay, or a stone circle in the heart of a wheat field, and chances are that you will experience something profound and steadying. As philosopher and writer Alain de Botton puts it: "Certain places, perhaps because of their remoteness, vastness, chaotic energy, haunting melancholy, exert a capacity to salve the wounded parts of us."

Five British pilgrimage sites

Join other wayfarers at these ancient and sacred places.

Stonehenge and Avebury stone circles, Wiltshire

Solstice gatherings of druids at the UK's most famous stone circle are well known, but at other times of the year it's impossible to get close to the megaliths. Better to

head to nearby Avebury for more convenient stone-hugging.

Bardsey Island, Wales

Bardsey was a major pilgrimage destination in medieval times, and is still a destination for anyone seeking a spiritual place.

Walsingham, Norfolk

Following a vision of the Virgin

Mary, a rich widow called Richeldis de Faverches built a shrine here in the 11th century.

The site has remained significant for Roman Catholics, and still attracts 100,000 pilgrims a year.

Iona, Inner Hebrides, Scotland

Iona has been a centre of spirituality since Saint Columba

established a monastery here in AD653. It now attracts visitors on religious and secular retreats.

Glastonbury Tor, Somerset

Glastonbury attracts both Christians and non-believers. The town may be full of crystal shops but up on the Tor, it's all about the view and King Arthur. »



Go on a personal pilgrimage

It can simply be a search for a place of personal significance – where a favourite author once lived, or a location that meant a lot to a family member or friend. Journeying to an author's former home, then wandering the streets they once wandered, feels like a way of getting closer to them, paying them respect and, possibly, understanding their work a little better. Jane Austen's home in Hampshire (jane-austens-house-museum.org.uk) provides the opportunity to imagine her writing at her desk, a trip to the Parsonage in Haworth, West Yorkshire (bronte.org.uk) puts you in the shoes of the Brontë sisters, and the village of Firlie and nearby Charleston House in East Sussex (charleston.org.uk) are where you will find traces of the Bloomsbury set who lived and worked there.

Cemeteries are a more solemn destination for paying respect, and searching for the relevant gravestone can feel like a quest in itself. The grave of Sylvia Plath in the West Yorkshire village of Heptonstall takes a bit of finding but is the more moving when you do, and Highgate Cemetery in North London is good for paying a visit to a variety of notable folk including Douglas Adams, Christina Rossetti and George Eliot.

Modern pilgrims

Those who have stepped out in search of something...

Satish Kumar The Indian activist and editor of *Resurgence* and *Ecologist* magazine walked the length of India to try to persuade landowners to donate a portion of their land to the poor. He also made an 8,000-mile pilgrimage for peace from India to Paris via Moscow.

Peace Pilgrim **Mildred Lisette Norman** was an American non-denominational spiritual teacher, mystic, pacifist, vegetarian activist, who adopted the name 'Peace Pilgrim' and walked for peace across the US for 28 years, stating that: "A pilgrim is a wanderer with purpose." She carried no money and never asked for food or shelter.

Alvin Straight In the film *The Straight Story*, directed by David Lynch, 73-year-old Alvin Straight travels 260 miles across Iowa and Wisconsin on a lawnmower to visit his estranged brother to make amends before he dies. As he travels, he changes the lives of the people he meets with his simple stories and wisdom.

Alan Partridge The Radio Norfolk DJ walked from his home to Dungeness 'A' Nuclear Reactor in Kent, following the footsteps of his father who had travelled there looking for work. His pilgrimage is chronicled in *Nomad*, which is: "the story of a one-man walk I undertook to try to learn about who I really am. I was able to use transport when essential but I set myself one caveat: no unlicensed mini-cabs." »

The pilgrim's pledge

Ways to turn an ordinary walk into a pilgrimage, as suggested by the British Pilgrimage Trust (britishpilgrimage.org).

- 1 Go slowly
- 2 Improve the way
- 3 Accept more, need less
- 4 Pass the blessing on

Take a walk on the wild side

"More and more people are becoming aware that they are suffering from 'nature deficit disorder'. They don't just want to go for a walk," says Guy Hayward, "they want to find meaning in the landscape, and undertake a journey of personal transformation." Searching for a significant, possibly sacred, natural landmark turns a ramble into a pilgrimage. Freshwater springs bubbling from the ground into crystal-clear pools have been revered for generations and provide a still place to stop and think. Many holy wells – often with alleged healing powers – are now covered by undergrowth but are well worth seeking out. Look out for rags hung from branches of nearby trees – offerings left by previous pilgrims. Following a river from the sea to its source is also classic pilgrimage material.

Ancient woodland and certain trees in particular (see right) make a satisfying end to a pilgrimage and provide an opportunity for a spot of tree-hugging and even tree-climbing. Some elderly yews, most frequently found in churchyards, are so huge and old that their centres are hollow, providing an opportunity to sit inside and immerse yourself in their beauty and strength.



Meet some remarkable trees

Ancient trees to focus your pilgrimage

■ The Much Marcle Yew, Much Marcle, Herefordshire

There is something awe-inspiring about a living thing that is at least 1,000 years old. This massive yew is hollow for the first ten feet and fitted with a bench inside so you can sit in it and immerse yourself in its woody magnificence.

■ Majesty Oak, Fredville Park, Nonington, Kent

The largest maiden oak in the UK, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*, this ancient tree has a 12m girth, a hollow trunk and is generally something of a gnarly marvel.

■ Yews on the rocks, Wakehurst Place, Ardingly, Haywards Heath, West Sussex

The roots from these elderly oaks grasp rocky boulders, creating a mythical, Tolkien-esque atmosphere that is worth tracking down.

Find more trees in *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* by Thomas Pakenham (W&N). For more about ancient woodland visit woodlandtrust.org.uk.

Books to inspire a pilgrimage

The Extra Mile: a 21st Century Pilgrimage

by Peter Stanford (Continuum)

An account of a journey around some of Britain's ancient religious sites meeting modern-day pilgrims on the way.

The Fish Ladder: a Journey Upstream

by Katharine Norbury (Bloomsbury)

Following a miscarriage, the author decides to follow a river from the sea to its source with her nine-year-old daughter Evie. Part pilgrimage, part memoir, part nature journal.

The Old Ways: a Journey on Foot

by Robert MacFarlane (Penguin)

A rediscovery of ancient tracks, holloways, drove roads and sea paths by academic and nature writer Macfarlane. Setting off from his

Cambridge home, he walks through varied landscapes, meets pilgrims, artists, wanderers and guides, and ponders the way in which we are shaped by our surroundings.

Spanish Steps: Travels with my Donkey

by Tim Moore (Vintage)

A humorous account of life on the pilgrimage route Camino de Santiago to Compostela on the west coast of Spain. No religious epiphany or spiritual quest but a real flavour of life as a pilgrim nonetheless.

Pilgrim Routes of the British Isles

by Emma J Wells (Robert Hale)

A useful and informed guide to seven British pilgrim routes including maps and historical background to medieval sites and shrines encountered along the way. **S**